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GASKELL'S HEROINES AND THE POWER OF TIME

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ABSTRACT

This paper, using Cranford, Ruth, Wives and Daughters and Sylvia's Lovers, develops the topics of the Scott chapter to suggest that, through an awareness of the power of time and circumstance to shape our lives, the traditional female values of love and forgiveness are revealed as our best hope for changing the course of history and directing the future of the community and the nation.

GASKELL'S HEROINES AND THE POWER OF TIME - by Susan Morgan

> It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be. Joseph Conrad

It's queer how blind the most insightful writers can be, how even someone who could look deeply enough into the human heart to write "The Heart of Darkness" and "The Secret Sharer" could distribute truth according to gender. We must suspect Conrad's use of the Cain story, that his belief that we are brothers and are our brothers' keepers really does refer to brothers rather than to brothers and sisters, that mankind means men. Certainly, Marlow's words on women show us one of the limits of Conrad's own power, great as it is, to touch the truth. It may be that Shelley's Demogorgon is right, that, finally, the deep truth is imageless. Yet the history of literature is a parade of its images, of attempts to touch the truth.

Not only Conrad but many of the British novelists who preceded him took the risk of trying to offer truth, of believing, in George Levine's words, "in the possibility of fictions that bring us a little closer to what is not ourselves and not merely language."[1] Nineteenth-century novelists continually defined that what, that something "really out there after all," in anti-heroic terms.[2] The link in fiction between realism and the anti-heroic has long been understood. I want to extend that insight, to argue here for the link

between realism, the anti-heroic, and the frequency of women as the lead characters in nineteenth-century novels. To touch the truth, to leave the world of our own, demands understanding, forgiveness, love. These sympathetic powers, often developed by female characters, lead to a sense of connections, the very sense that Marlow feels and understands as brotherhood, however dark the knowledge that binds us may be. Thus Marlow's literary ancestors, people who took their own dark journeys, prior to which they too were merely savages, and whose routes marked the way for his, include such famous creatures as Emma Woodhouse, Gwendolyn Harleth, and Isabel Archer. They also include the less famous characters of Elizabeth Gaskell.

Critically, Gaskell's work has not fared well. Much has been made of her ability to describe the curtains in Mary Barton's house or the landscape around Monkshaven and the relations between landowners and whalers there.[3] But these kinds of appreciations are too easily linked to our biases about gender, our belief that women novelists, Burney, Austen, Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte (not Emily, who is bizarre, nor Eliot, who has that masculine mind), describe or mimic their worlds rather than invent them. Evaluating works by a woman writer in terms of their reflection of the writer's life or the society outside the novels too often connects to thinking that women lack the creative fire to be like Yeats' golden smithies, forging art out of the unpurged images of life. And in the specific case of Gaskell, tributes to her descriptive ability grant her work the kind of mimetic realism no one respects, that which merely reproduces fact. Effectively, this has worked to deny her fiction any substantive

realistic power, to see it as an eclectic mix of reportage and sentiment.[4]

Even recent readers of Gaskell's work who do not simply repeat the old strictures have been ungenerous to Gaskell. Carolyn Heilbrun, from a perspective that agrees with Coleridge and many other readers that "great minds do tend to be androgynous," asks of Gaskell's novels: "is there a passage which does not betray the gender of its author?".[5] Heilbrun, who has written a brilliant analysis of the woman as hero in nineteenth-century fiction, faults Gaskell for writing within conventions, sometimes playing with them but never radically challenging the structures society has made up and called true.[6]

Gaskell's novels, like those of Dickens or of Scott (who is an enormous influence on her), do more than record sympathetically her observations of urban life and memories of country life. Coral Lansbury, in her fine full-length study of Gaskell's work, argues persuasively that the resolutions of the novels, far from being naively optimistic, should be read as the fictions they are, patterns that do not verge from reality because they are reflections distorted by sentiment but because they are not reflections at all.[7] It may well have been unlikely in Manchester for relations between worker and employer to find solutions through individual friendships or for a worker to die in an owner's arms. But realism in fiction has never been so simple a matter as to be measured by what has or probably would happen in life. Certainly, Gaskell's novels will not allow us such easy evaluative tools. Like so many other Victorian novels, her works offer a complex definition of the real. To get to that

definition we need new kinds of questions, not those that trigger our own fictions about the factual situation in another time and place but those that may guide us to the different truth Gaskell's novels tell. A literary lie is, after all, another name for a novel. And Conrad, a great mind who may not have been androgynous, must have known that not only women but both men and women, insofar as they write novels, "live in a world of their own, and there has never been anything like it, and never can be." And living in a world of one's own has been, at least in the history of literature, one of the best ways to be in touch with truth.

A moment in Cranford, the idyllic novella that has often been used to denigrate Gaskell's fiction as escapist, directly addresses the subject of truth as opposed to a world of one's own. Miss Matty, the spinster heroine, about to open a tea shop, first asks the shopkeeper presently selling tea in Cranford if her enterprise would lesson their business. Mr. Smith, the narrator's father, who does not live in Cranford, scorns these scruples, announcing that "such simplicity might do very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world."[8] Mr. Smith lives in the town of Drumble, and Drumble, in this novella, comes to stand for the world, the real world, the world presumably in touch with truth. There human nature is competitive, even wicked. But we never see Drumble, we never visit it. Drumble remains outside the boundaries of the novella, an invention, a "cartographer's conspiracy," given no more reality in the story than that other outside place, the India that Miss Matty's brother, Peter,

ran away to when still a boy and that he so impulsively returns from in his old age. The cheating rogues that Mr. Smith so constantly watches for in Drumble are as fantastic as the flying cherubim Peter tells of shooting down in the Indian Himilayas. One is the practical, clear-sighted realm of business and the other the dreamy and heroic realm of high adventure. Yet both are alike in two fundamental ways: they are masculine and they are unreal.

Like so many nineteenth-century novels, Cranford in its small way offers a debate on the nature of reality. Cranford does not insist that there are no rogues or cherubim, no devils or angels, no competitive businessmen or heroes. Rather, it insists that the values those businessmen and heroes have believed to be trivial and naive, the values of women who live in a world of their own, far from being out of touch with truth, are a powerful force in creating what we call reality. In Nina Auerbach's words, "the cooperative female community defeats the warrier world that proclaims itself the real one."[9] Since the true or the real is what we are continually in the process of making, the feminine values of Cranford, though gentle remnants of a fading past, are the best hope for the future and must be carried into our understanding of what we are and do. They are the values we must use in creating ourselves. And surely that is part of the point of the narrator of Cranford. Daughter of Mr. Smith, native of Drumble, Mary nonetheless writes not of where she lives but of where she visits, the life of which so clearly enlivens her mind and heart. Mary is a convert, discovering in Cranford a truth her father cannot tell and seeing through the eyes of Cranford to the fictions he takes

for truth.

We see how much the pattern of this novella owes to Scott. The apparently contrasting forms of upright citizen and heroic figure that appear so often in Scott, in Nicol Jarvie and Rob Roy, Mr. Fairford and Hugh Redgauntlet, Reverend Staunton and Geordie Robertson, appear again in Mr. Smith and Peter as the Aga Jenkyns. And Gaskell's point is much the same. Both figures, seemingly so different, are alike in presenting versions of human nature that are aggressive, that offer a fixed understanding of human nature, one which does not value the pliable, the passive, the weak. Instead of these two figures, which for Gaskell as for Scott merge into one, Gaskell offers a second alternative, that of a lead character who is not particularly aggressive or assertive, yet who represents the idea of human nature the story clearly supports. The distance from Edward Waverley to Miss Matty Jenkyns is but a short one after all. For both are persuadable characters, alike in their sensitivity to those who surround them, though Miss Matty shrinks from disagreements at the tea table and Waverley fights in a war.

The connection to Scott is limited in one important way. Edward Waverley, Harry Morton, Darsie Latimer, these young men stand for what we can simply call human values, the values of kindness, mercy, love, the same values so beautifully dramatized in Jeanie Deans. In Cranford these are Miss Matty's values and also those of the obliging Captain Brown. Yet Cranford, as the story of the village of Amazons, explicitly defines those values as feminine in a way that Scott's work does not. The examples of Captain Brown and of Peter

when he returns from India make clear that these values can appear in men. Nonetheless, they are the values of a world of women, not, as in Scott, the values of both male and female lead characters. Yet for both novelists, and this may be the center of what Gaskell has learned from Scott, these values are directly linked to a sense of time, of history. The special quality of Cranford is that in it values traditionally thought of as feminine are both tied to an idea of time and explicitly defined as feminine. In Gaskell's full-length novels the definition remains implicit. But they offer what Cranford only suggests, a developed examination of the nature of history and an exploration of how our ideas of history are intertwined with how we define truth, reality and ourselves.

The traditional reading of Ruth, that declaredly unconventional novel about a woman raising a bastard son, faults Gaskell for a cowardly ending, for killing off her heroine by having Ruth nurse her seducer through the cholera, and take the fever herself. This is a level of self-sacrifice many readers don't much admire. If we see the novel as liberal propaganda, aimed to portray the conditions of life for fallen women in order, in Meredith's words, to "Help poor girls," or in Trollope's, to feel their "misery is worthy of alleviation," the ending does seem cruel.[10] Is there mercy or is there justice? Is Ruth, having earned the right to live, yet required to die? Did Gaskell fail in the courage of her convictions and at the last destroy her lovingly created sinner or were the convictions limited to no more than a partial redemption?

An answer may lie in avoiding the presumption that the intention is the realization, that the novel may be judged according to the degree to which it fulfills Gaskell's declared social purpose.[11] After all, Ruth has no obligation to be history or propaganda, or to realize our projections of the plight of seduced women in mid-nineteenth century England. We cannot impose that notion of truth on a fiction. And because Ruth is a novel and not an history or a tract, it makes more sense to place the book in a literary rather than a sociological context. We can begin to get at the kind of truth Ruth tells by turning to the fictional conventions it inherits and transforms.

When we consider British novels whose subject is fallen women we must inevitably find our way back to the great heroine who defines the type, the sublime Clarissa Harlowe. Ruth is a latter day Clarissa. And the thought of Clarissa may immediately remind us of that other, less successful heroine of Richardson's and the literary price of an earthly reward. Pamela happily marries Mr. B. He has not, of course, actually seduced her, and if he had such an ending would presumably not have been possible. But it should not have been possible anyway, given the terms of their struggle, which is why we recognize Pamela as a flawed fiction. Happily, Ruth descends not from Pamela but from Clarissa. And the struggle Ruth wages does lead to victory, great victory, although it also leads to death. There are many ways in which the patterns in Ruth remind us of those in Clarissa. I want to suggest just a few here, those particularly that might help us to distinguish what is special and important about Ruth.

Ruth is gentle and innocent while her seducer, Mr. Bellingham, is handsome, charming, clever, and wicked. He seems to have all the strength, the power and, certainly, the money on his side. Indeed, their respective positions are so unequal during Ruth's first encounter with Mr. Bellingham that the character in Richardson's novel she may most resemble is not Clarissa but Rosebud, the little servant at the inn whom Lovelace decides to spare. But Ruth does not remain so unequal. As with Lovelace and Clarissa, Bellingham's victory over her body becomes her victory over his soul. The novel is structured so that from their first encounter to their second, more than ten years later, their positions have been reversed. The little, trembling rosebud has become a daunting figure. When Bellingham, never understanding her, imagining that the old imbalance still applies, begs her to marry him, Ruth, who does understand him, is repelled. And Clarissa's fabulous cry that "my soul is above thee, man" echoes in Ruth's insistence to her old seducer that she no longer loves him and will never love him again. She will never marry him, never live with him, so that their son will never be like him.

But this brings us to the great distance between these two novels, both of which dramatize so intensely and so starkly the power relations between the two sexes. In Ruth there is a son. And, more importantly, there is sexual passion, the passion that generations of critics have only been able to find through their interpretations of Clarissa's dreams and Richardson's subconscious. Ruth openly admits her past love during that conversation on the Abermouth sands. She was not raped, she was seduced. And even though, like Tess so many

years later, she knew not what she did, she deeply loved her seducer. While Tess walked indifferently, listlessly, away from Alec D'Urberville, Ruth had to be thrown off, blocked by Bellingham's outraged mother at his bedroom door. And even then, in that Welsh mountain village, she literally ran after the carriage that carried her beloved away.

Unlike Clarissa's attitude to Lovelace, who had drugged her to virtual unconsciousness during the crucial, and single, event, Ruth's superiority to Bellingham is not tied to a denial of sexuality. Gaskell offers us passion and then purity, consummation and then innocence of heart. Ruth has loved him, she has lived with him, she has, at least momentarily, preferred death to life without him. Yet, as one of the relatives of those dying of fever whom Ruth nurses can testify, "She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off"(425). What accounts for the difference between the two heroines is Gaskell's commitment to the power of time.

Ruth is a novel about redemption, about the transforming power of time. The subject of a fallen woman is an expressive vehicle for examining the active relations between character and event that constitute a personal history because the whole notion of fallen women assumes that one's status is fixed, that there is no personal history, just an endless repetition of that one defining event. One can lose one's virginity only once, one can fall only once. As Byron, a master of these categories, put it, "the woman once fallen forever must fall."[12] This is the simple message of Esther, in Mary Barton. But in Ruth Gaskell does not give an event the Hegelian status of being, as

if it were outside time.

The subject may be clearer if we briefly compare Ruth to a more contemporary novel that also uses the fallen woman, Dickens' Bleak House. Though written six years later and by a novelist who consistently supported Gaskell's work and strongly praised Ruth, Bleak House presumes the traditional view of the fallen woman as irredeemable or, more precisely, redeemed only in death. Is Lady Dedlock's crime the ambition that denied her love for Nemo, or the passion that fulfilled it without marriage and thus produced Esther Summerson? Certainly, her ambition alone would not have resulted in that hunted death. And even if we feel both ambition and passion make Lady Dedlock a fallen woman, can we conceive of an Esther Summerson who has known illicit sexual love? Though born a bastard, Esther is beyond the reach of circumstance, placed there by her own lack of desire, her inherent purity of heart. Those two qualities are, indeed, the same. Lady Dedlock is damned because she has wanted, and has gotten what she wants. Much of the plot of Bleak House depends upon an anti-sexuality, a suspicion of sexual passion, which can only see it as a sign of an uncontrolled person or a corrupt heart. Dickens would not have understood Blake. He was too fond of producing his own Thels and approving of them. Lady Dedlock's fate, though tragic, is inescapable. Indeed the movement of her whole story is the attempt to escape the inescapable, to get away from the fact that will haunt her and her lover to their graves.

The brilliance of Ruth, as social history, as intelligent fiction, is that it insists upon the power of circumstance, the very

power that Clarissa vanquished and that Lady Dedlock was unable to invoke. Choosing neither prostitution nor death as the fate of its heroine, the novel simply imagines a new set of circumstances, that a person, having once passed into the world of experience, simply lives on, lives more or less as other people do. In fact, Ruth's affair with Bellingham is the beginning of her life. The ignorant fifteen year old farmer's daughter turned dressmaker's apprentice vanishes in the light of understanding what she has done and become. That is her trip to the Congo.

Ruth is a novel of education, a form that nineteenth-century novelists continually used for exploring subjects quite different from the issue of an individual process of maturation. In Ruth the heroine to be educated is a kind of character defined as past educating, a heroine, in Gaskell's words about Esther, Mary Barton's aunt, past hope. The subject not only offers ideas about change, as we would expect from a novel of education, but also casts an argument about the issue of reform the implications of which extend beyond any personal history.

Reform in its political aspect is an explicit topic in Ruth and the election process appears in the novel in a way that looks forward to Eliot's use of it in Middlemarch. Mr. Bellingham reappears late in the novel metamorphosed into Mr. Donne, the Liberal candidate brought in by Mr. Bradshaw, a leading businessman in Eccleston. Everything about the candidacy is shady. A London parliamentary agent, approached by the Eccleston dissenter, Mr. Bradshaw, finds the

rich and bored Mr. Donne to run for the seat. This arrangement substitutes for appropriateness and commitment. Bribing the voters gains the election. And thus the old Tory interests are challenged in the name of progress. We think of Eliot's reformer, Mr. Brooke, running on a platform of land reform while his own tenants' houses crumble.

But while Mr. Brooke is the heroine's ineffectual uncle, Mr. Donne is the heroine's quite effectual seducer. Mr. Brooke is booed by the voters and abandons his election, and Mr. Bulstrode, Eliot's corrupt civic leader, is forced to resign from his official positions and abandon his role as a spiritual and political force in the town. Eliot's Will Ladislaw and Dorothea carry us into the future by their own involvement in politics. But both Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw sustain their public success. Ruth and her son, Leonard, find their future in medicine. The point in Ruth is not that there are corrupt politicians, politicians who are having trouble getting or keeping power, but that politics itself is rejected as a mode of reform.

And at least one reason why the novel rejects politics is that it is a world without women, a world of men who hold office and of men who put them into office. Women literally do not vote. Indeed, they can have nothing directly to do with the process at all. And because their relation to the political process is radically different from men's, because they stand outside, they are in a privileged critical position toward a world that understands itself as a central, if not the central, mode of defining human behavior. They may decide that what is important is political reform, joining the process through

women's suffrage and through women holding office. That, of course, has been main historical choice women have taken. But they may also, as in Gaskell's novels, use their external perspective to offer a critique of politics itself, one which presumes that there is a necessary link between the nature of the process and its exclusion of women, one which is capable of imagining, precisely because of its position, that social action outside politics might be our better hope.

Politics, though long characterized as corrupt, has at least as long been characterized as a major form of describing civilization. How familiar we are with the idea that a people can be understood by its government, its laws, its political process. We need go no further than Hobbes and Locke and Swift to find the primacy of this belief in English thought. And how familiar as well is the assumption that not only a nation but human nature itself can be understood by its political forms and, just as important, that the measure of human progress can be taken by looking at the development of those forms. Politics is history, the outward form of the inward truth. For those who believe in change, in the improvement or decline of civilization, there is a dynamic relation between political forms and character. History, in this mode, is public, measuring not only the past of a people but pointing the way to the future. Such public history not only describes but creates. And making history can be understood as participating in whatever political process defines a government in action.

Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw are making that public history in Ruth. Yet we recognize once again that familiar pair, the businessman and the hero, a serious version of that comic couple in Cranford, the man from Drumble and the man from India. One is a hard-headed and practical manufacturer, the other a handsome and charming man of leisure. But even more than Cranford, the source for these two goes back to Scott, to The Heart of Midlothian. That book, with an insight that will reverberate in nineteenth-century fiction, literally makes identical the criminal and the hero, and just as literally represents the near relation of that criminal adventurer with the successful community leader. The metamorphosis of Geordie Robertson, the outlaw who has seduced Effie Deans, into the young English gentleman, George Staunton, echoes strongly in Mr. Bellingham's reappearance as Mr. Donne. And just as George is actually the son of the upright English minister, magistrate of the town, Reverend Staunton, so is Mr. Donne related to Mr. Bradshaw. In Ruth as in The Heart of Midlothian, the forces of seduction, of dissolution, of self-indulgence, are in cahoots with the forces of law and spiritual order. These seemingly different kinds of vision are united in an aggressiveness, an assertiveness, that defines the political process and is at odds with the values the novel would support.

For Gaskell as for Scott, what is at stake is a way of understanding history and therefore a way of understanding, and thus defining for the future, both character and event. How are we to judge what we are and do? The answer offered by Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw depends on fixed definitions, on human nature as essentially

static, on easy interpretations that do not require the complicating awareness of a sense of time and a fallible self. Mr. Bradshaw, destructively inflexible, simply disowns his son when Richard is discovered to be a thief. But he is not allowed that simplicity. The decision does such violence to his feelings that he suffers a stroke. Mr. Donne too is used to having people do and be what he wants. If his manners are more tranquil, his temper is not. Both are figures of authority, encompassing between them two major areas of social, political and economic power in England, the new manufacturing class and the older class of inherited wealth.

But Mr. Donne is also Ruth's seducer and Mr. Bradshaw the righteous citizen who exposes her sin. Part of the brilliance of the novel lies in connecting these two and showing us what that connection has to do with the role of the feminine in creating and interpreting history. The forces that use women are tied to the forces that condemn them. Juxtaposed against the activities and characters of Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw, the novel offers a true reform movement, in Ruth. Her private story of personal growth, her slow climb upward from that terrible fall, become more than a plea for understanding the plight of fallen women or a stirring account of victory over sin or an example of the redemptive power of Christian faith.

When we come to evaluate Eccleston, when we write its history, what story, since history is a story, do we select? Many a history, even now, assumes that change is marked by the victory of the liberals over the old Tory interest, by the new success of the manufacturers, that these are the stories to tell. Ruth offers an extended critique

of that assumption, a claim that the life of a community does not lie in these large public events and cannot be measured by economic and political forms. And if we ask why not, the answer the novel gives is clear. These traditional modes of describing the historical process not only ignore but actually violate another mode of measuring progress, a mode whose values are traditionally characterized as feminine, a mode that measures by the principles of mercy and love. Ruth Denbigh, through the account of her true reform, represents that mode.

The last third of the novel, in which Ruth is exposed and redeems herself as a volunteer nurse during the cholera epidemic, is crucial for exploring the question of what we call history. Unless the community is changed by Ruth's story, it remains a personal history. What is impressive about the novel is that it does not merely pit fake public progress against substantial private progress but examines how private progress can become public. Our public realms must take up the values we have relegated to the home. One simple way to describe the plot of Ruth is that the fallen woman becomes the angel in the house who then, and this is the essential point, becomes the angel in the town. And the whole town, even Mr. Bradshaw, learns the lesson of forgiveness and the power of change.

The message of the novel is clear. As long as history, as the record of human progress, is measured in traditional public terms, in the terms of political or economic moves, there will be no progress because the values behind that kind of measuring deny and even attack the best of the human spirit. Moreover, the ascendance of these false

measures can be marked by a society's treatment of its women and is characterized by a rejection of what are classed as feminine values, a belief that to be loving and merciful and generous is to be weak. But those supposedly feminine values are the real measure of progress, the true story of a community's growth or lack of it, and only when they are recognized as such can a community, a society, improve. The traditional masculine values of assertiveness and domination, however much those who hold them may feel they are the leaders of the future, are linked philosophically to a rejection of change, a belief in inherent authority and fixed truth. They represent a denial of history. For change is made by those like Thurstan Benson and Ruth Denbigh, who actively practice the values of forgiveness and affection. In these lie our hope, if the future is to free itself from repeating the past. In this sense Carolyn Heilbrun was right, Gaskell has a feminine story to tell.

Is Ruth an historical novel? Is Gaskell an historical novelist? Avrom Fleishman has said that "What makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force--acting not only upon the characters in the novel but on the author and readers outside it."[13] I have been arguing that Ruth does present a concept of history as a shaping force, both inside and outside the novel, the force of traditional gender values. And, to extend the point, the novel argues the existence of more than one concept of history, both inside and outside its pages, and the need for principles to select the right one, the one that allows for

progress rather than repetition. Perhaps it is better to say that the novel mistrusts public history, the record of national, political and social movements, of big events, because the principles that determine the importance of these events cannot evaluate what the novel offers as the primary processes of personal and community development. Thus we cannot trust the public, social version of Ruth Denbigh's history, which marks her as permanently fallen, and must turn instead to a new definition of history, one which offers principles according to which we can not only measure but actually allow and, therefore, in some sense create Ruth's growth.

The linking of two male characters to represent the practical and the adventurous, the yin and yang of traditional masculine definitions of reality, along with the contrast between their public history and a private history with public consequences, is found not only in Cranford and, in more realized form, in Ruth. It is a constant pattern in Gaskell's novels. One if the traditional critical difficulties in approaching Gaskell's work has been the frequent claim that it is a divided canon, that the Manchester or social reform novels (Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth) have little to do with the nostalgic rural novels (Cranford, Cousin Phillis, and Wives and Daughters), while Sylvia's Lovers may have little to do with either.[14] The sense of divisiveness too often has led readers to approve of one sort of work at the expense of the other.[15] But if we reach beyond the country/city dichotomy in Gaskell's settings, we can see that the representations change but the subjects, the questions, and the underlying structures do not.

The question of what John Lucas termed "the nature and problems of social change," and what I have defined more specifically as the hostilities between larger movements of history and personal changes with public effect, provides the basic structure of Gaskell's novels.[16] All ask what progress means. And the constant answer to that question shapes the endings of her major works. We see it clearly in North and South, in the contrast between the workers' strikes and riots and Margaret Hale's friendship with Bessy and Nicholas Higgins. That friendship, linking Higgins to Mr. Thornton, may have been the beginning of more factory reforms in Manchester than all the strikes and riots. This is surely the point of the dinner scene late in the novel. Mr. Thornton testifies to Mr. Colthurst, "a rising member of parliament"(512) who seems to be in the novel precisely to receive this testimony and thus make a private lesson public, that "I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions . . . can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life"(515).

Mr. Thornton describes the tension as between class and class, but that is his specific experience of a larger tension the novel creates between two ways of understanding human relations and thus two ways of making and interpreting history. Gaskell's first novel, Mary Barton, foreshadows North and South in contrasting the story of a father involved in nationally known events (here, such workers' efforts as trade unions and the People's Charter offered to parliament

rather than the crisis of confidence in the Church of England that leads Reverend Hale to give up his living) with the heroine's more significant, ultimately, more socially significant, story. Even the particulars of its ending are very close to those of North and South. Mary Barton's own use of the class issue includes an explicit description both of what the values are that must be used to make the future and of what their sources can be.

Mary Barton offers an early version of the link between Mr. Thornton and Nicholas Higgins, in the terrible bond that ties Mr. Carson to John Barton. Though it be to learn of his son's murderer, Mr. Carson descends from his house to the lodgings of his worker for that required scene of "actual personal contact." The scene does bring "the very breath of life" to Mr. Carson for it brings the mercy of forgiveness fthatrelieves his grief. It leads to yet another contact between the classes, when Mr. Carson questions Jem and Job about John Barton's political views and motives and finally to Mr. Carson changing his attitudes and his practice to his Manchester employees. Many improvements, both existing and yet to be carried into execution, "take their birth from that stern, thoughtful mind, which submitted to be taught by suffering"(451).

Mr. Carson's teacher is, of course, the bible. But the message of the bible is a feminine force in these times.[17] As Ellen Moers put it, this was an age in which the "feminist impulsion" found its expression in a "Christian humanitarianism."[18] The biblical message of love is carried throughout Mary Barton by the women, by Aunt Esther, by Margaret even as she goes blind, by Alice, by Mrs.

Barton, and by Mary herself. But it is taught to Mr. Carson even more immediately in a small but key incident he witnesses after leaving Barton's rooms. Mr. Carson sees a little girl on the street suddenly knocked down by a rough boy. She is bloody and crying. Yet "the little sweet face" begs her nurse to release the boy, saying "He did not mean to do it. He did not know what he was doing, did you, little boy?" And she puts up her mouth, "to be kissed by her injurer"(428). Mr. Carson goes home, reminded by that apparently weak little girl to read again where he has seen those words before. He does read, learns the great lessons of love and forgiveness and, through that personal education, changes the public history of Manchester labor relations.

All of Gaskell's major works juxtapose public and private history to have us arrive at similar conclusions. I have already discussed the community vindication of the gentler virtues in Miss Matty's success in Cranford as a non-competitive shopkeeper and in Ruth's acceptance at last by the people of Eccleston. The novels invent, through the resolutions of fiction if not of fact, possible answers to the problem of how we live in time and, therefore, of how we can draw the future in our own image and what we would have that image be. I want to turn now to these concerns as they appear in Gaskell's later fiction, with particular focus on Wives and Daughters and on the great novel Gaskell described as "the saddest story I ever wrote,"(VI,XII) Sylvia's Lovers.

The tension between public events and personal history with public effect is not the final pattern. It directs us to the fundamental dualism of Gaskell's fiction, which structures all her novels and many of her short stories, the dualism of father and daughter. Critics have often suggested that the central character in Mary Barton is John Barton, and that Gaskell erred on the side of feminine sentimentality, the need to tell a domestic love story, by making Mary Barton the lead instead. John Gross finds the novel weakened by the shift of emphasis from father to daughter and J.G. Sharps, noting that Gaskell had early considered calling the work "John Barton," draws the conclusion that what "primarily interested Mrs. Gaskell" was the tragedy of John Barton's life and "Mary's romances [were] of secondary importance."[19] But to suggest this is, of course, precisely to miss the point. However sentimental we may judge Gaskell's treatment of Mary Barton to be, her placing Mary as the lead of the novel, in spite of her own feeling that "John Barton was my hero," would turn out to be essential to Gaskell's enterprise (Letters,42). The novels question and reject the very attitude of mind that would judge John Barton's story to be the more significant story.

What Gaskell's novels are about is replacing the stories of our fathers with the stories of our daughters and thus offering a new understanding of history and a new history to tell. That new history has not yet, as we say, come true, because the values of the masculine world still dominate, in our time as in Gaskell's, what we select to call history and so much of the history we make. But that new

history, if not yet true, is being told as fiction, in nineteenth-century British fiction, in the novels of Gaskell, told again and again.

Unlike Gaskell's first work, the last and not quite completed novel, Wives and Daughters, does not offer us a particular public story of events in contrast to the heroine's life. Public history lurks on the rim of the story, in the political fortunes of the Cumnor family, in Roger Hamley's scientific discoveries in Africa and scientific meetings in London. But these are distant and shadowy events. The masculine world of public events, of labor relations, of liberal elections, of wars and impressments, so prominent in the previous novels, is now no more than a ghost. This is not to say that the issues themselves have changed, but rather that Gaskell's veils for containing and expressing those issues have become more translucent.

The father-daughter tension, Gaskell's original and continuing choice for embodying in character the masculine- feminine disparity of values, strolls forth at last as her explicit subject in this final work. Why the choice should be father and daughter is clearer when we recall Miss Pole's wonderful remark in Cranford, "my father was a man, and I know the sex pretty well"(115). We might also think back to Frankenstein, to the father-daughter parallels Knoepflmacher has so beautifully pointed out between Godwin and Mary Shelley and Victor Frankenstein and the monster.[20] Presenting the disparity of values through a father and a daughter allows Gaskell to emphasize both the authoritative aspect of masculine definitions of life and their

diminishing power, along with the inevitability of the ascendance of feminine values. Time is on their side, for daughters are making the future, fathers conserving the past.

In spite of a title, probably not of Gaskell's own invention, in which male roles are conspicuous for their absence, Wives and Daughters places the tensions between father and daughter as its central event.[21] It is tempting, not only from the suggestiveness of the title but also from many of the plot details, to argue that the novel's central subject is actually mothers and daughters.[22] Certainly, the relations between Hyacinth Kirkpatrick and her daughter, Cynthia, are of major importance and it would be fair to describe the book as a story of two sisters, Cynthia Kirkpatrick and Molly Gibson. If Cynthia has a bad mother, Molly has no mother. And yet, of course, that is not true, for Molly has many mothers, though not the one who gave her life. She is surrounded by mother figures, concerned and kind women like the Miss Brownings, Betty and Miss Eyre, Mrs. Hamley and Lady Harriet, all reaching out in loving support to this appealing girl.[23] Yet in spite of the abundance of mothers in the novel, none has the importance to Molly of the father with whom she goes "riding together down the lanes"(510).

To diminish the doctor's importance is to diminish Molly's achievement as well. It is also to ignore Gaskell's whole representation of the replacement of masculine values by feminine values and thus to miss the political point of the book. Appealing as it may be to see in Wives and Daughters a women's tradition of mothers and daughters, we cannot make Gaskell's fiction feminist that way.[24]

The tradition the novel does treat seems to me even more important in its public significance. Because her concern is more than personal but also public and social, Gaskell explores the masculine inheritance that, if we are to move beyond domestic relations, we must all face and, we would hope, transform.[25]

Wives and Daughters tells the story of how Molly, shy, agreeable, obedient, dutiful, grows out from under her doctor father's powerful sphere. And Mr. Gibson's sphere is powerful not simply because he is a dictator, though, of course, he is, but because Molly loves him, deeply, truly and, the novel insists, appropriately. Wives and Daughters is a brilliant work, in part because it delineates people's forms of dominion over others without any melodrama and hardly any drama, reminding us that so many struggles take place without rebellion or defiance, take place quietly among good people, among families, among people who really do share warmth and affection and love. The process of change in such a sphere will be barely marked and slow. Wives and Daughters traces that change with a lightness, a gentleness that is itself a source of hope. Progress will come, if it can come in such quiet ways.

When we meet Mr. Gibson in the early pages of the novel it would be easy to conclude that progress has come. Mr. Gibson seems a development from the briefly introduced Mr. Davis, the clear-sighted doctor in Ruth. Mr. Gibson is a father "very willing to gratify his little girl," even in ways that involve "a little trouble on his part"(7), and we first watch him using care and intelligence and "a

little natural diplomacy" to arrange for Molly to go to Lady Cumnor's annual party at the Towers. And when, at the end of that gala day, Mr. Gibson comes home to find that Molly has somehow been left behind at the Towers and gallops off dinnerless on the long ride to bring her home, we can only feel that Molly has a very fine papa, indeed. And their mutual delight on the ride home, Molly's relief to be away from the constraints of the Tower and assertion that "it is such a comfort to know that I may be as rude as I like,"(28) suggest a relationship with neither coldness nor oppression.

Gaskell's fathers are particularly fond of their daughters. John Barton and Nicholas Higgins are both rough men who can be softened by their daughters' smiles, as Reverend Holman's heart is broken in Cousin Phillis by his daughter's sighs. Reverend Hale in North and South turns to his daughter as his main support in the crisis of his life, to mediate between him and his wife, while Daniel Robson sees in Sylvia the light that animates his home.

In this company Mr. Gibson is exceptional not in his love for Molly but in the sane and thoughtful way in which he tries to raise her. He is a doctor as well as a father, an honorable category for Gaskell no less than for Dickens. We are reminded of Allan Woodcourt, Esther Summerson's loving doctor in Bleak House. Mr. Gibson too is a modern doctor, the new doctor, brought in sixteen years before the story opens to aid and then replace old Mr. Hall. Moreover, this modern doctor is at ease with the gentry in a way unheard of by his old-fashioned predecessor, is as dedicated as he is competent, and publishes papers in medical journals as well. Clearly, in so many

ways Mr. Gibson seems more to represent the future than the past.

The novel does offer us one of those standard backward fathers, one of those traditionally primitive male authority figures, in Squire Hamley, who loves the past as deeply as he loves the trees on his estate, planted when he was a child and grown old along with him. The squire continues "the primitive manners and customs of his forefathers"(44) of the eighteenth century, and we suspect there is some connection between this preference and the fact that he is "obstinate, violent-tempered, and dictatorial in his own immediate circle"(44). Yet surely the claim of the novel is that the squire's form of backwardness, obvious as it is to his community as well as to his readers, is not the most dangerous form. We are in greater danger not when we recognize the primitive but when we fail to recognize its civilized disguise. The proponents of progress, as Blake and Shelley and Arnold also remind us so eloquently, can enslave the elements without freeing themselves.

Of all Gaskell's fathers, none so committed to the future as Mr. Gibson, freed as he is from the irrationality and old prejudices of such local country gentlemen as the squire. And that makes the doctor a peculiarly fit character through which to explore the question of what the past should bring to the future, of what being progressive might mean. For the doctor does represent the past, because he stands for a vision of the future that, though decorated with all the latest social and intellectual advances, though carried on "in the best modern way," yet is doomed in fundamentals merely to relive old ways. Part of the greatness of Wives and Daughters is that

its primary representative of living in the past should be such a forward looking practitioner as Mr. Gibson.

The squire and the doctor, seemingly so different, one so old-fashioned, ignorant and rough, the other so scientific, rational and up-to-date, share fundamental qualities. Both place control above feeling and both are authoritative, even tyrannical, with their families. If this seems strong to say about the witty doctor, we recall how Mr. Gibson first sent Molly to the Hamley's, saying that there was a secret reason but requiring her to submit unquestioningly, "to be an honourable girl and to try and not even conjecture what the reason may be"(64). This is an apt example of Mr. Gibson's notion of what honor means in a girl. Molly's single unsuppressed response to his announcing his coming marriage results in his immediately turning away from her, mounting his horse and riding away. Mr. Gibson's power to get his daughter's compliance depends a great deal on what he sees as his firmness and the novel presents as his withholding his love. The squire would control his children through tightening his heart and his pocketbook, the more modern doctor simply through tightening his heart.

The buried heart, the will to control, the cynical realism, are familiar elements in Gaskell's fathers, just as familiar as the fact that they are all in some way stern men who intimidate their daughters. Mr. Bradshaw's self-control is so rigid as to cause his breakdown. John Jenkyns, the dead father in Cranford, drove away his son with his domineering ways and thus killed his wife. The

consequences of speaking "in his old way - laying down the law"(69) were so dreadful that he became humble. The embittered Mr. Robson leads a riot and is hanged while John Barton commits murder. We recall what happens when Mary Barton's mother dies: "one of the good influences over John Barton's life had departed that night. One of the ties that bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth was loosened, and henceforth the neighbors all remarked he was a changed man. His gloom and his sternness became habitual instead of occasional"(22). We see a similar though less dramatic shift in Squire Hamley when his wife dies. Having lost "her pleasant influence over him," the squire has no one to smooth his rough temper and realizes that he is "becoming a domestic tyrant"(285). Without an external force of kindness and affection, the squire's heart hardens into an aggressive wilfulness.

The doctor's heart has hardened as well. If Mr. Davis from Ruth is an early version of Mr. Gibson, his ties to the squire suggest that his closer relatives are the familiar duo of Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw. In Ruth Mr. Davis and Mr. Donne/Bradshaw form a simple contrast. Their descendants in Wives and Daughters are Mr. Gibson and Squire Hamley. But these two have more complex connections than simple difference, and understanding their relations leads us to see what Mr. Gibson has in common with Mr. Donne/ Bradshaw. For if Mr. Gibson really is a more rational, more intelligent man than Mr. Bradshaw, he nonetheless shares that domestic tyrant's conviction that he can and should put away feeling at will, and that to do so is to be superior to, in advance of, other people. Mr. Donne, of course, found putting

away his feelings for Ruth impressively easy. Neither Mr. Gibson nor Mr. Bradshaw would boast that degree of ease. Yet the doctor, telling himself that as a professional he knows the physical ill effects of experiencing violent emotion, "had rather a contempt for demonstrative people," and "did not give way to much expression of his feelings." Preferring to be "his own cool, sarcastic self,"(122) admiring his own control, the doctor "deceived himself into believing that still his reason was lord of all"(33). We see that his sense of being modern and advanced, of belonging to the future rather than the past, is entwined with his sense of being superior as a man of reason and strong will.

The tension here is not between reason and emotion, between self-control and the lack of it, as Mr. Gibson and Mr. Bradshaw choose to believe, but between an open and a buried heart. As Craik has pointed out, Mr. Gibson "deliberately suppresses feeling, and so, . . . does violence to feeling unwittingly."[26] For all his love of his daughter, Mr. Gibson continually suppresses expressions of affection toward her and, using the rationalization that his decisions are for her own good, makes choices that protect him from strong emotion. Buried in Mr. Gibson's heart is his memory of "poor Jeanie,"(54) the woman we must surmise is his first and his only true love. Yet we are given no clue about what happened to that love. Mr. Gibson's first marriage, to his boss's niece, who "was good and sensible, and nothing more," (32) is more appropriate and convenient than passionate. His second marriage, to Hyacinth Kirkpatrick, is downright cold. He needs someone to control his cook, he needs someone to chaperone his

daughter.

We can hardly account for these significant decisions in Mr. Gibson's life as examples of a strong heart governed by reason. Mrs. Goodenough may be forgiven on the occasion of his first wife's death for "gasping out her doubts whether Mr. Gibson was a man of deep feeling," though she judged "by the narrowness of his crepe hat-band"(33). Mr. Gibson's "general plan to repress emotion by not showing the sympathy he felt"(152) too often results in not feeling the sympathy, in preferring "wilfully [to] shut his eyes"(372). The process works not only for sympathy but for pain and anger, and thus provides the doctor with some degree of domestic harmony. We see that Mr. Gibson is a descendant not only of Gaskell's previous characters but of Austen's Mr. Bennet, that other famous father who also likes to be "his own cool, sarcastic self." And when Mr. Gibson's wilful blindness toward his wife no longer worked, he "was not a man to go into passions, or ebullitions of feeling; they would have relieved him, even while degrading him in his own eyes; but he became hard and occasionally bitter in his speeches and ways"(476). Thus feeling repressed burrows into self-deception, deliberate ignorance, and ultimately a false and cold view of life.

For Mr. Gibson putting away his feelings does not simply mean that he hides them from others or tempers them with reason but that he really puts them away from him, that he lives and acts without, and often against, the guidance of his heart. It is not simply that he is not ruled by feelings. What we come to realize is that the doctor does not respect feelings at all. He does not like to express them

because he does not like to have them. For him, to consult one's heart is to fail in objectivity. And Mr. Gibson holds objectivity dearer than the people he cares for, dearer even than the capacity to care. We may recall Shelley's warning that "the great secret of morals is love."

We must ask ourselves how this is to be seen as an advance over old ways. To ask the question is to begin to free ourselves from those alluring definitions of modernity that focus on scientific and rational principles of control over our environments and ourselves while turning away from the visions of feeling, definitions that cherish a buried belief that control is a form of authority, an aggression against the past. It is to have learned the lesson that frees Blake's Milton from his satan: "I know my power thee to annihilate/ And be a greater in thy place & be thy Tabernacle." The lesson of history is the lesson of repetition, of the eternal return. Gaskell, no less than Blake or Neitszche or Shelley or so many other nineteenth-century writers, warns us to step out of that cycle, to relinquish the self-assertive victory that is its own defeat, and make a new kind of history with a new sense of what progress means.

A defining attribute of Gaskell's particular representation of how we can move successfully from the past to the future is that the story that repeats itself is masculine and the one that offers real change is feminine. As Blake and Scott had already suggested, the key to the future must be forgiveness, which by its very nature allows that the future can be different from the past. The step Gaskell takes is to make explicit the tie between that fundamental Christian

virtue and traditional female virtues, to recognize that the virtues of mercy and forgiveness and love had been devalued by society, classified as feminine, and supplanted by the preferred and presumed masculine virtues of assertion, justice and rationality. As Blake tells us, "He smiles with condescension, he talks of Benevolence & Virtue,/ And those who act with Benvolence & Virtue they murder time on time."(Milton, Book 2) How do we envision, how do we portray, a new generation who could break out of this cycle of generation? Gaskell's lovely and original answer is that redemption can imaginatively be depicted through a domestic history in which fathers are replaced by daughters rather than by sons.

That replacement process directs the plots of most of Gaskell's fiction. And once we begin to see that in the novels the spiritual and emotional hopes are embodied as daughters, we can explain why such odd things happen to the sons. Certainly, other readers have pointed to Gaskell's differing presentation of daughters and sons. Sharps observed that "Mrs Gaskell seems to have had an inclination for introducing into her stories selfish sons and unselfish daughters," while Rubenius noted wryly that Mrs. Gaskell "did not accept the conviction of many parents that a brother had an undoubted right to consider himself superior to his sisters."[27] But these insights need to be extended.

One of the peculiarities of Gaskell's novels is that, unlike most generational patterns in British fiction, the main family line is traced through a daughter and the usual female role of extraneous

sibling, if represented at all, is filled by a son. Moreover, that son often exists only to be absent. This is true of Peter, the Aga Jenkyns from India, in Cranford, John Barton's dead boy in Mary Barton, Reverend Hale's sailor son, Fred, wanted for treason and hiding in Spain in North and South, Mr. Bradshaw's weakling forger banished to Glascow in Ruth, Mr. Robson's surrogate son, Charley Kinraid, the sailor carried off to a man o'war, to glory and a French prison, by a press gang in Sylvia's Lovers and Squire Hamley's great hope, poor Oswald in Wives and Daughters. Certainly, Gaskell's own brother disappeared at sea. But to let that bit of biography stand as an explanation of such an important plot pattern is at best unsatisfactory. Like so many readers' assumptions that Gaskell wrote novels as a sort of grief therapy, to compensate for the death of her little boy, it is to use psychology as an alternative to rather than a part of interpretation.[28]

The pattern of absent or simply irrelevant sons is so prevalent in the fiction that we may read in it a rejection of the standard assumption that the future of the family and the British nation will be carried through its sons. They leave home, they leave family, they leave the country, they leave the world. Again and again the novels point out that we cannot count on them at all. Characterized by absence, they are also not much use in their moments of presence, often bringing disturbance and conflict to the sisters struggling with responsibility at home. We need only think of Margaret Hale's brother, Frederick, visiting England incognito with a charge of treason to evade. His longed-for return as the hope of the

family brings joy but also danger, the terrors of near discovery at the railroad station, and the shame of Margaret's protective lie. So much for the dreams of being rescued from the difficulties of their situation by the beloved son and heir.

The pattern of the absent son also includes the dream that the son can make life better and the too frequent reality that he will add to the difficulties of the struggle. In some sense, Gaskell's sons are all foreigners, remembered and familiar and beloved, yet living some other life in some other world. They cannot really make history because they are not part of the community. If they are alive they are adventurers, like Scott's dark heroes; they are impulsive and passionate and childlike, having, as we are told in a startling description of Fred Hale, "the instantaneous ferocity of expression that comes over the countenances of all natives of wild or southern countries"(293). They may tell fantastic jokes, like the Aga Peter, or turn Catholic, like Fred Hale, or immigrate to Canada, like Jem Wilson in Mary Barton and Edward Holdsworth in Cousin Phillis, or go to Africa, like Roger Hamley, or simply to war, like Charley Kinraid in Sylvia's Lovers. But they all go, and because they are the sons, the heirs, the young, brave men of action, those that are at home watch and hope, and believe that when those young men return a better world will begin.

But, of course, it doesn't. Some never return, and many return briefly, long enough for those at home to learn that there will be no heroic rescues in these reunions. Fred Hale, though rich in Spain, comes back without the English money to pay a doctor's fee for

his dying mother. Charley Kinraid comes back too late and precipitates Sylvia Robson's tragedy. Charley's "bold and fervent" plea to "come with me" for "your marriage is no marriage" and "shall be set aside"(404) is no match for the solid reality of Sylvia's baby's cry. What happens while those brave sons are gone cannot be "set aside". Sylvia is a wife and mother. And even Miss Matty Jenkyns, about whom we might wish to say that nothing has happened to her while the Aga Peter was away, has, nonetheless, grown into an old, poor, spinster. Peter brings her a pearl necklace, for "that little delicate throat which . . . had been one of her youthful charms." And Miss Matty is obliged to remind Peter that "I'm too old." But it is "just what I should have liked years ago-when I was young"(182).

The lesson of Gaskell's novels, like those of Scott, is that the heroic figures cannot rescue us from life, cannot put us outside time. Scott's dark heroes are usually attached to the past, to a cause that can no longer be won. Gaskell's heroic figures, on the other hand, tend to be attached to our dreams of the future, as sons and heirs, as adventurers in new worlds. But Gaskell's claim, like Scott's, is that these adventurers do not really lead us into the future, that they offer no proper sense of time or of place, because their only inheritance is to be doomed to repeat the violence of the past. That is why Margaret Hale's last sight of Fred is his wrestling with a brute at the railroad station, why Roger Hamley's letters hint of unmentionable dangers in Africa, why Charley Kinraid sails on warships and the Aga Peter's stories are of mutinies and gunpowder and touches with death. And even those who are not actually having

adventures, like Jem Wilson or Edward Holdsworth, are men of action who strike out on their own.

This is not to say that the novels utterly reject the world of these sons. We turn back to Cranford, both to Mary Smith's statement that "For my part, I had vibrated all my life between Drumble and Cranford"(185) and to a plot resolution that returns the Aga Peter to Cranford for good, to live out his old age in harmony and affection with Miss Matty. Yet these sons, even Peter, even builders of a new railroad in Canada, even fighters in some of the famous battles of their times, do not play a role in choosing and making the future of their families, their neighborhoods, their towns. They are the people who left. They leave in their place their sisters, the daughters who will carry the weight of creating here and now a new and better world. And perhaps the sadness of these novels is related to our present perspective, with its knowledge that the "new and better world" did not come, that the worlds of the sons won, that what actually lay ahead for these communities was the Boer Wars, the Great War, and the continuous aggressions we live in now.

Wives and Daughters dramatizes Mr. Gibson's masculine notions of control as fictions through the truer insights of his daughter, Molly, one of those women of "steady every-day goodness"(254) whom it is so much harder to be than a standard heroine. We recognize Molly, as we have been recognizing others like her since Austen in Northanger Abbey first described Catherine Morland's thin awkward figure, ignorance of the principles of drawing, and affectionate heart.

Whether we think of her as an anti-heroine or simply a character outside the conventions that accompany heroines, Molly is familiar to us. She is a character of limited power, both because she is a female and because, as Gaskell arranges it (as had Austen and Charlotte Bronte before her), her story begins when she is a child. And it is a story that plays out its feminine/masculine version of one of the most familiar and most loved of narratives, one that has been with us since David and Goliath or Jack, the Giant Killer, or the Tortoise and the Hare, the narrative of the ostensibly weak but true hero who triumphs against the odds.

Realism, as I have already suggested, is anti-heroic. But another way to say that, one that invokes so many of our tales which would define the heroic, is that the notion of realism often includes the repudiation of aggressive notions of the heroic in order to light up for us what real heroism would be. If there is one shared quality of fiction and reality it is that both are played out in time. The trouble with the heroic, and thus the reason why it is so insistently both the subject and the enemy of the novel, specifically the realistic novel, is that it is not. That is the point of Scott's distinction between his dark heroes and his lead characters and of Gaskell's distinction between fathers/sons and daughters. What the distinction means in her work, that the heroic is the masculine and the anti-heroic the feminine, also implicitly means that the hero of a fiction of reality will be a heroine. And that heroine will win her victories along the amblings of time.

We see that victory in a minor way, in Aimee Hamley. Though French and a servant, everything Squire Hamley despises, and very young, gentle, obedient and shy, she wins the old squire's affection and, finally, the full control of her boy. This foreign interloper replaces the dead son as the daughter who will direct the Hamley future, being, as we are explicitly assured, the person most capable of raising the family heir, her child. Molly too is young, gentle and obedient, though not shy. We might describe Molly as a cross between Austen's Fanny Price and Catherine Morland. Certainly, Molly has Catherine's eager and frank ways. And, like Fanny at Mansfield Park, this apparently powerless little girl becomes the central figure in renovating her world. Yet the limits of the comparison can help us to see what is special about Gaskell's creation. Molly's influence reaches out beyond a family to a community. And part of the reason why is a quality that must remind us of another of Austen's heroines. Like Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, Molly Gibson is gifted with self-love.

Never actually at war with her father, nor outwardly acquiescent but filled with dark, bitter thoughts, like Jemima Bradshaw, Molly has a strong sense of self that continually presses on the bonds which would control her. Thus, while her father decrees that she must have only a minimal education, it was "by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father," who was "always afraid of her becoming too much educated,"(35) to let her have French and drawing lessons. Yet in the long process of outgrowing her father the French lessons don't matter much. What does matter are

Molly's modes of human relations in comparison to those Mr. Gibson prefers. He seldom has a word to say to those old friends, the Miss Brownings, but Molly's visits to them bring energy and expressed affection. And it is Molly alone who teaches us, as she so fearlessly teaches Lady Harriet, that the Miss Brownings, in spite of their difficulties in wearing the right wig, are characters rather than caricatures, real people after all.

Molly's major form of transmuting her father's values into her own is dramatized through their differing approaches to the two great tragedies of the novel, the deaths of Mrs. Hamley and then of Oswald Hamley. Mr. Gibson is a fine doctor, always ready to go to a patient, and able to do good when he arrives. The novel offers ample testimonial to his skill. And yet, that testimony appears only in details at the edge of the action. With the two patients we see him attending in the foreground of the story, he is not able to help at all. Indeed, for all his efforts, for all his visits and his knowledge, for all his absolutely being in charge, both these patients slowly and inexorably die. If Bleak House seemed to offer, both to Esther Summerson and to the community, advice reminiscent of what many a mother is said to advise her daughter, that the way to salvation lies in hitching your wagon to a doctor, the events of Wives and Daughters give less reassurance in that direction. The professional life of social action cannot do much against the continuing pains and losses of life and is, in fact, in central moments ineffectual. As Meredith was to put it so wittily fifteen years later in the "Prelude" to The Egoist, "We drove in a body to Science the other day for an

antidote" to our modern malady. "Before daybreak our disease was hanging on to us again, with the extension of a tail. . . . That is all we got from Science."

The real doctor is, of course, Molly. She is no more able than her father to stop those Shelleyan necessary evils of "chance and death and mutability." But she can address the unnecessary evils, in a way that he cannot. As Mrs. Hamley tells her, "You give one such pleasant sympathy, both in one's gladness and in one's sorrow"(95). The pleasant sympathy that Mrs. Hamley is so grateful for on Molly's first visit deepens throughout the story, makes Mrs. Hamley's dying more tolerable and pierces the darkness of her husband's grief. By the time Oswald dies, with his remaining son away in Africa, only Molly, the borrowed daughter, can reach the Squire's heart. And she revives the Squire not only through her kindness but because, with Roger crucially absent, only Molly holds the secret of Oswald's marriage and his child, the new life, the Hamley heir. As she had rescued Cynthia from Mr. Preston's blackmail through effort and sense as well as love, showing the strength but also the power usually granted a brother or a father, so Molly, along with Aimee, rescues the Hamleys. And in both cases what she restores is the future they by themselves would have lost.

The strongest part of Molly'character is a warm, loving heart. But she combines that obvious quality with a natural sense of her own value and an eagerness for experience. This is what protects her from the lesson of self-denial as the key to goodness and thus enables her to become the strongest force for good in her community. Commenting

on Roger's advice to think of others because "you will be so much happier for it," Molly wonderfully responds, "No, I shant." And she goes on, with a depth of insight that Roger himself feels, to make what we readers must also feel is one of the most luminous remarks in the novel: "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived"(154). And her story might as well never have been written.

Doctoring, so respected in Ruth and Bleak House as a hope for the future, is no longer automatically good. Nor is the presumably feminine spirit of self-sacrifice, seen both in Ruth Denbigh and in Esther Summerson. Bringing health to a society must have as its primary tool a heart that is both expressive and self-assured. For Gaskell as for Shelley, the discoveries of science cannot take us into the future if we reject the passion to imagine what we know. And unlike the tradition of benevolence and of womanly service as the pure essence of the gentle sex, Gaskell has moved on to represent directly what had been implied by Ruth Denbigh's initial sexual affair, that passion includes our own hungers, our own desires. The lesson of the doctor and the daughter is not only that we must have feelings, but also that we must value their expression and their fulfillment as an essential part of our connections to other people. Affection must be visible, and its receiving as well as giving be accepted as a public value, if we are to create and strengthen the ties that can bind us, as for a while they bound John Barton, to "the gentle humanities of earth."

Molly Gibson's life is a success story, though Gaskell did not live to write its final lines. Roger, we believe, came home and married the strong and gentle woman whom he had at last learned to love. This happy ending, envisioned if not realized, culminates a line of such conclusions and the lessons they imply.[29] Jane Austen told a similar story in Mansfield Park, in Edmond Bertram's switch of affection from the flirtatious and weak principled Mary Crawford to sisterly Fanny Price. Adam Bede turns from that kittenish and immoral victim, Hetty Sorrel, to Dinah Morris. And although Gaskell's own novels before Wives and Daughters do not also borrow from this familiar pattern of a threesome, they usually conclude with the victory of the heroine, her success at last. Miss Matty is the toast of Cranford society, with her beloved brother at her side. Ruth, of course, dies, which is always a limited form of success. Yet she dies only after her own reintegration into the community and their public tribute to her. And Richardson with his two heroines had already taught us that death can outshine life as a way to reward the victor and end the tale.

An initial variation on the pattern is in Mary Barton, where Mary rescues Jem Wilson from death at a public trial, but then goes off to a new world to make a new life with him. The terms that I have been arguing are of a masculine disappearance to other worlds as opposed to heroines making the future at home. Although Mary is a force for community good in her strong action to effect the outcome of Jem's trial, her subsequent move to Canada with him does not fit the

pattern. I imagine that in this first novel Gaskell, her aims not fully worked out, thought escape from the slums to be the best hope for the Manchester worker. Whether or not she was right, after this novel her heroines would never again be allowed the solution of simply moving away. They stay, and their staying is part of what makes the difference.

Gaskell's fullest version of her heroine's success may be in North and South in the fate of Margaret Hale. "That woman," as the last two words of the novel term her, not only sees her values of personal kindness and contact between classes prove more effective than more aggressive ways, she also gets the money and the man. Margaret is rich, she is the investor who can float Marlborough Mills once again, and she is declaredly loved. We have often been delighted with the fate of heroines who receive only the last of those three, or, perhaps, the first and last. But if to be rich and loved is a familiar happy ending for women, the middle term, to be a principal investor in a factory, is a new kind of reward. It is the reward of power, the power to effect a community. Mary Barton and Ruth Denbigh save their lovers' lives through an heroic and public effort. Margaret makes a similar effort when she stands in front of Mr. Thornton facing the rioters who would break down his door and is bloodied by a stone aimed at him. But Margaret is also given another kind of heroism, slower and less grand but with more extensive effect. She saves her lover's business. This is possible not simply because Margaret is rich, although implicit in any reward of riches, if there are enough riches, is the possibility of investment. The significant

point, of course, is that Margaret actually does invest. And she invests because her values explicitly include a commitment to a future that is not only hers but is also the future of her community. One of the great insights of North and South is to make personal and community success not only connected but literally identical. That is why Margaret's investment, unlike her physical heroism, will both reopen the factory and rescue the man she loves. Reading the novel through an understanding of women and money James gave us in his portrait of Isabel Archer, we may suspect that generous gesture. For Margaret's investment is also a divestment, as she quickly turns her newly acquired money and power over to a man. Still, the claim of the novel's ending is that Margaret, though her financial decision, will help the future of Manchester workers, as she has already influenced the quality of their working conditions.

These happy endings, and the successful futures they foretell, are not offered to the victorious heroines alone. One of the problems with the Cranford community of aged Amazons, a problem that must shrink our hope for its future, at least until Martha marries, is that it is a world without a man in the house. And if we think back for a moment to Ruth, we notice that the woman who teaches Eccleston the redemptive power of time has herself a teacher at home, Thurstan Benson, the primary force in her education. Many readers have noticed the femininity of Mr. Benson, how much his gentle qualities, small stature, and delicate health are used to characterize him as feminine. Particularly striking is the comparison of him with his larger, sturdier, more active sister with her "masculine tricks."(111) In the

Welsh mountain village where they meet Ruth it is Mr. Benson who must teach his sister the proper interpretation of Ruth's story, the compassion that must preface any active aid.

This reversal of traditional gender traits recurs in the novels and many readers have suggested that it is characteristic of Gaskell's work. Coral Lansbury's insight that Gaskell's characters are often androgynous can form the basis for our understanding of how the novels deliberately play with our assumptions about gender.[30] Deirdre David has pointed out that in North and South Mr. Higgins and Mr. Thornton become less conventionally masculine as they fall under the influence of the gentler virtues represented by Reverend Hale and his daughter, Margaret.[31] Margaret's movements are full of "a soft feminine defiance"(70). And yet, when she first meets Mr. Thornton, though he is used to "habits of authority," she "seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once"(70). The text is full of such comments that tell us that soft, quiet Margaret, both in relation to the world and in relation to her own family, is "a powerful and decided nature,"(54) and assumes the control that directs events. Her tall dignity and assured presence is explicitly contrasted with her father's weak timidity and desire to be led. We cannot conclude that Margaret is masculine and Reverend Hale feminine because the point is more complex.

For all her strength and decisiveness, Margaret embodies and preaches those virtues of gentleness, sympathy, tolerance, and deep and expressed affection, those "gentle humanities of earth" that, along with those other qualities of weakness and fear and dependency,

have been relegated to the female role. In her softness and her power, Margaret teaches us that those humanities, so long gone unrespected by the masculine realms of competitiveness and aggression, realms that see themselves as the true reality, must be taken up by us all. The man who can look on the workers' suffering "with contempt for their poorness of character"(98) shows us that the choice of competitiveness is the choice of ego, the choice that reads in the misery of others proof of the value of self. Are we so blinded to fact, to time and place and circumstance, as to call such a self-flattering vision realistic?

Against that vision the novel places a commitment to a more encompassing view, one made visible by the power of sympathy to help us be disinterested enough to reach the truth. That commitment can be held by both men and women, as can either of the negative poles of masculine aggressiveness or shrinking feminine dependency. For the point is precisely that the gentle humanities are not actually feminine qualities, they are not distributed by gender, though we have designated them as such. Instead, they unite qualities we have considered separated, divided up by gender, the powers to reach out with feeling for others and the powers to be strong and firm within ourselves. For Gaskell's point, of course, is that to be able to sympathize is also to be intelligent and adventurous and brave.

We mistake the novels then, if we read in their endings, their pattern of fathers supplanted by daughters, a defense in principle of female ascendancy. Daughters, in Gaskell's novels, give us and their communities and their lovers the future. And that gift has a dramatic

validity in the novels that we cannot theorize away. We are not offered portraits of men rescuing the future for their women and their towns. But neither are we offered a straightforward conclusion that what lies ahead is a woman's world. What we should say is that those who lead us into the future don't inherently have to be women, although, historically, for the time and place of Gaskell's novels, they do. That this will change in a better time and place is often built in to the end of the story. Thus in Ruth the future is explicitly left to the men, to Thurstan Benson, who already understands love and mercy, having been the source of it all along, and to Mr. Bradshaw, who has learned to understand. With values properly human, they can guide the future in Ruth's stead by educating her son. And we see the same point years later in North and South, in Aimee Hamley making the Hamley future through educating her son. In these two moments in which Gaskell provides a glimpse of who will follow the ascendant daughters, both are sons. The new world, we are to conclude, may be male or female, but fundamentally it will be based on more generous values than the present, if it is to be new at all.

Gaskell's novels are not realistic in showing us what is but in showing us what might be. These portraits of little towns and country neighbors, of faded ladies and flowering girls, of strikes and riots and class conflict resolved into harmony, of lovers united and unforgivable sins forgiven and redeemed, all may be dreams in narrative. But they are dreams that could come true. This is not to say they will, that there is any sense of the inevitable about that pretty future the novels invoke. The novels offer visions of how we

can shape history that are possible but, precisely because we actually can shape history, are not inevitable. We really are to understand these books as dreams, while remembering, to borrow Delmore Schwartz's beautiful phrase, that in dreams begin responsibilities. These works do not ask us to believe in progress. Instead, they depict for us what progress, if we were to choose to make it, would have to mean. And central to that meaning is a turning away from the very values of assertiveness that the present still affirms as the measure of a future that outshines the past.

But lives and novels don't always work out as we would wish. Many readers, among them Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Bronte, protested the heroine's death that ended Ruth.[32] Nonetheless, that novel's ending does promise hope. There are others of Gaskell's works that do not. Because progress is not inevitable, there are dreams that don't come true, where the struggle for the future different from the past is made, but the struggle is lost. We see it in the languid eyes and lost dreams of cousin Phillis, the daughter who has outgrown the innocent world her father made, only to find her new world composed of pain and loss. We see the pattern most brilliantly in the last novel before Wives and Daughters, Sylvia's Lovers.

Sylvia's Lovers is a dreadful tale, depicting, as seldom has been so depicted in English fiction, the hopeless disasters that our choices of passion can bring. As Kester, the Robson hired hand and lifelong friend to Sylvia Robson, tells her near the end of the story,

"It just spoilt yo'r life, my poor lass," and "Philip's life were pretty well on for bein' spoilt"(502) as well. And Sylvia herself concludes about the feelings and events that shaped her fate that "I think I shall go about among them as gnash their teeth for iver"(524). Her meaning is religious, that she will be damned. But without the religious dimension her faith provides, her description of what remains to her is fitting enough. In a Christian universe Philip's correction is probably right, that "God pities us"(524). Sylvia will not be damned to hell for eternity for the curse that refused Philip forgiveness when Charley Kinraid, the sailor Sylvia loved and believed drowned, came back to tell her that Philip had known Charley's fate and kept it hidden in order to marry Sylvia himself.

But in this world Kester is right. Sylvia's story is of a life spoiled, irretrievably spoiled. If the moral of the story were enough, if we were to read Sylvia's Lovers as a Christian parable and not a novel, we might perhaps conclude that Sylvia's life was not spoiled, or that it was, but that the loss was bearable because it happened in a just cause, because through her sufferings she learned the lesson of forgiveness.[33] Sylvia did learn that lesson, but it cost her not so much her life as her self. Crushed by events, all that is left of Sylvia is "a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black" who dies "before her daughter was well grown up"(530). The hopes of the young farmer's daughter who walks to Monkshaven in 1796 to sell her butter and eggs and buy cloth for a pretty new cloak are never to be fulfilled. And the energy of the girl so "full of frolic and gambolling life"(13) is turned to hate and bitterness and sorrow. Why

that hope is not fulfilled, that energy turned inward for destruction, is the subject of the book.

Even a brief description of Sylvia's sad fate calls up for us the similar fate of another, presently more famous, country girl created twenty-eight years later, Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles. The maiden we meet at the "club walking," keeping warm in her thin white dress because she "had a private little sun for her soul to bask in," continues her walk, into the chilling landscape of Flintcomb-Ash Farm and finally to the rocks, growing cold in the night, of Stonehenge.[34] We meet Tess with a red ribbon in her hair as we meet Sylvia about to choose red material for her cloak, and for both the color foretells their doom. These details may also remind us of Eliot's Hetty Sorrel and the seduction narrative all three echo, the tale of little red riding hood. But Sylvia's Lovers and Tess of the D'Urbervilles (and, indeed, Adam Bede) are connected more fundamentally through their plot structure.

Both plots unfold by means of the relations between the ignorant and lovely young heroine and the two men who want her, whom she chooses between. And the options, in both novels, share essential qualities. Alec D'Urberville and Charley Kinraid, though one is a newly landed gentleman and the other an impressed sailor, both can be categorized as adventurers. They are men of action, physical, sensuous men, romantics of the flesh, who prefer doing to thinking or saying and who live intensely in the present. They are drawn to the smiles, the blushes, the drooping eyes of the rural maid, and to the mouth each so quickly finds a way to kiss. Charley takes his victory

at the game of "kiss the candlestick" at the Corney's New Year's party, while Alec claims "the kiss of mastery"(45) as the price of not racing his gig down the steep hills of the road to Trantridge.

We do need to qualify this similarity. Alec D'Urberville may be an adventurer, but he is a decadent and corrupt version of the type, in this more resembling Mr. Donne, Ruth's seducer, than the hearty Charley Kinraid. But though Charley is honorable to Sylvia and Alec dishonorable to Tess, we cannot see this as a difference in basics. For Charley's character too is darkened by tales of other girls he has betrayed in the past. And although Alec is himself unambitious, he is the immediate product of an energy that has raised his family to a class now theirs by effort rather than by birth. We see a similar energy and upward mobility in Charley himself, who uses the active courage of his type to rise to lieutenant in the navy and marry a lady, one with a good dowry. In this sense both men represent new ways.

Philip Hepburn and Angel Clare also embody versions of a common character. They too represent new ways, but as the thinkers, the talkers, the teachers, the educated men who believe that they see in the world around them fresh meanings that are framed from values beyond the merely material. Angel and Philip tend to think themselves in advance of other people, in class and education for Angel and in common sense and reason for Philip. When Philip tells Daniel Robson that "laws is made for the good of the nation, not for your good or mine," he sees as regressive Daniel's angry response of "Nation here! nation theere! I'm a man and yo're another; but nation's nowhere"(43).

Philip wants to improve Sylvia, to modernize her. With her mother's blessing, he wants her to learn the lessons of reading and ciphering and geography, as Angel wants to teach Tess modern questions and ideas. Each believes that he is more interested in rescuing that country girl than in ravaging her and neither really can admit the extent to which his passion is stimulated by what Hardy memorably terms "the aesthetic, sensuous, pagan pleasure in natural life and lush womanhood"(133).

Though Philip is a shop clerk and Angel a gentleman, they are both of them intellectuals, turning away from the life of the body for the life of the mind. This is not to say that they are unaware of external reality, for both also share a primary commitment to practical life and what they see as forward looking ways. Thus Philip is a successful clerk at Foster's shop, a good businessman who is promoted to partner, while Angel is preparing himself to be in business as well, as a farmer, and apprentices at Crick's dairy to learn the trade. Yet both suffer from a classic problem of those who see themselves as more intelligent and rational than their fellows. They deceive themselves, about their motives, their feelings, their desires.

The point in exploring these connections goes beyond my strong hope to suggest the as yet unrecognized depth of what Hardy, as well as so many other Victorian novelists, learned from Gaskell.[35] Both use these three virtually identical elements, the ignorant, luscious and life-giving woman, the active, physical man and the contemplative, sensible man, along with a plot that develops by means of their

changing relations, to dramatize the novelist's sense of the ties between the larger dynamics of history and the passions of individual lives. The distinction between the novels does not lie so much in the particular variations each gives his or her version of character or even in the fact that Hardy's heroine loves the intellectual man of business and Gaskell's heroine chooses the physical adventurer. This last distinction melts when we translate it into the language of Cranford. What we would say there is that one picks Drumble and the other India. And the trouble with both of these presumably modern choices is that neither can transport us into a better world.

And yet there are fundamental differences between the two novels that can help us to discriminate the special quality of Gaskell's sense of our lives as occurring within history. One way to get at that quality lies in the issue of choice. We could say about Sylvia Robson that she rightly chose passion but wrongly chose the man, the man who seemed the more passionate but really was not. Charley was a true lover, but Philip loved her more deeply, and Sylvia could not see that until she heard of Charley's marriage, and knew "that Philip would not have acted so"(461). The reunion, the forgiveness, come at last in part from her being able to value the strength of his heart at last. But Tess, for Tess there never was a right choice at all.

We are told of Alec's meeting with Tess that "she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man and not by some other man,"(35) a remark echoed in Tess's own wish that Angel had chosen her to dance with that early day at the club

walking when she was a virginal sixteen. Implicit in such words and in the action of the novel is the sense that Tess has been fated, marked out somehow, if only by the red ribbon in her hair, to a march of circumstances in which love and salvations always appear too late. For we know that Angel would not have been the right man when he met Tess. Indeed, he is only made a better man by the trial occasioned by learning of Tess's fall. We must and do hold Tess responsible for her tragedy, for her own desires were part of its making. And yet, encompassing the fact of personal free will, and encompassing also the historical pressures of being a peasant girl in nineteenth-century England, is the larger directive of simply being human, of being a child of nature, the sport of fate. As many readers have seen, Hardy's brilliance lies in part in having made it impossible for us to select any one of these factors as determinate.

And yet I would say that finally Tess is a victim, of history, of nature, of her own self. We cannot imagine that her beautiful vitality could have become other that what it did become, a crushed life on a blighted star. In Hardy's work the relations between our private lives and the historical forces that shape our cultural history are fundamentally at conflict. Perhaps, more precisely, the conflict lies between our hopes for happiness and both the private and the public forces that mark our fate. We are not only touched but touched immeasurably and uncontrollably by the circumstances that surround and create our lives. The fading of the sea of faith, the new intellectuals and new leisured gentry, the changing ownership of land and new values of crops, all the issues

that make up the situation of rural England in the nineteenth-century, will force our paths. So will our own dreams and passion. And even time itself, the simple movements of day and night, will kill us at the last.

Tess's story has an inevitability that Sylvia's does not. This, of course, is always a tricky argument to make, since I am somehow claiming that the novel, which is all we have, could have been other than it is. It is a claim perhaps only visible through the light of Gaskell's other novels. They do tell a different story in the sense that they tell the same story in a different way. Margaret Hale's life, Molly Gibson's life, fulfill the promise that in Sylvia's fate is merely broken. As Andrew Sanders has put it, the characters in Sylvia's Lovers "are not prisoners of fate."[36] We know with Gaskell in a way we do not with Hardy that people can find their road to the future and that when they do not the reasons are not the givens of human life.

I do not mean to put Hardy's work of the side of inexorable fate and Gaskell's on that of free will. They are both historical novelists and, however determined by the givens of time and place they may establish their characters to be, inherent in any notion of living in history is the possibility of change, of life becoming different than it is. Put simply, fate in historical fiction always combines the inevitable and the chosen, and for the critic to aim to measure the relative weight of each is a foolish task. Yet we can say that in Hardy's novel the extent to which fate or its modern equivalent, the processes, both random and significant, of history, plays jokes on the

heroine is explicitly offered as a subject of speculation. Tess of the D'Urbervilles is about what happens to us in these modern days. And what happens is dreadful beyond what we deserve or can control.

In Sylvia's Lovers what happens is also dreadful beyond what we deserve. But Sylvia Robson does have a choice, though not finally the choice of a right lover for, as with Tess, both lovers are the wrong choice. She has a choice about how she feels, not so much in terms of how she loves, but of how she decides to respond to the uncontrollable circumstances, the jokes fate plays. At the mercy of events larger than she, Sylvia must still understand them, interpret them, measure them in human terms. And the large claim of the novel is that the meaning she gives them can itself transform what happens to her.

Sylvia chooses what she believes is the right attitude to take, the brave and honorable stance in facing the trials of her life, the attitude of heroic firmness. What this means, in actuality, is that she is harsh in her judgments, relentless in her views. Sylvia translates her intensity of feeling into rigidity, believing that to feel strongly is to stand out against change. That kind of confusion has been familiar to us since Sense and Sensibility, when that sensitive seventeen-year-old, Marianne Dashwood, assured us that "at my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed."[37] And in Sylvia's life as in Marianne's, there are voices to challenge that view, to remind her, as Kester says, that "Niver's a long word"(337). Kester, Jeremiah Foster, Hester Rose, in them Sylvia has the guides not possible in Tess's universe, where no one's vision is wider than

circumstance. But she also has less positive influences, influences through which her bright joy in life is permanently, irretrievably faded into a dull grey, that servicable color she rejected for her new cloak so long before.

To identify intensity with fixity is to deny time. It is also to imagine, along with Scott's dark heroes and their lost causes, that change, that a history in which the future is different than the past, is a form of weakness, a way of giving up. It is to look on life as conflict, where duty lies in being permanently loyal to your own side. That is one reason why, as a married woman, poor Sylvia haunts the fields and ocean walks that return her happily to "the free open air"(361) of the older days from which she was torn away. But history, the larger forces that effect Sylvia's life, the time and place and circumstances that shape her present and influence her future, for all their power, are not immune to her desires, if she but understand her own power to free those desires from the chains of a fixed heart.

Sylvia's Lovers is situated "at the end of the last century,"(1) in the past and precisely in that past near enough to be accountable for the present. Most of Gaskell's longer fiction, even that set in an earlier time, offers dreams of what could be, visions that show us what we must carry with us from other days. But Sylvia's Lovers is not so much a dream as the projected background to the reality in which we now live. Gaskell's novels are dreams because we, as a community, as an entire culture, need to become other than we

are. But she also offers, in this sad story, a visionary account of why we haven't become so, of what has gone wrong, of how we got to be who and where we are. When her story is told, Sylvia is long dead. But the consequences of her choices are the way we live now.

The story uses once again the primary structure of Gaskell's fiction, the pattern of father and daughter, and a simple way to describe the source of Sylvia's failure is to say that she never outgrows her father's values or, more precisely, she outgrows them too late. Daniel Robson passes on two essential, dangerous qualities to his daughter, his love of a world of adventure and his power to sustain his resentments. Daniel Robson is an old-fashioned man, but there is nothing old-fashioned about the values he represents. They are the same values of Charley Kinraid, that portrait of progress, the specksioneer turned navy lieutenant, and of the gang who impressed him against his rights and his will. They are also the values of the citizens of Monkshaven who burn the inn where the pressgang stays, and of the judges who hang Daniel Robson at York for his part in that burning. Even more extensively, they are the values of France and of England, of the governments that sent their people to fight at St. Jean d'Acre even as they had during the crusades. These are the heroic values, the martial values, the values of aggression, of firmness, of war. And one reason why this Monkshaven story suddenly reaches out to depict a famous foreign battle in a far away land is to remind us that the values that break and shape that little isolated community are the same values that direct the rest of England, and also England's relations with Europe and the rest of the world.

The problem with those martial values is clear on the morning of the battle at St. Jean d'Acre. Charley Kinraid's "heart was like a war-horse" as he moved to the "walls where the Crusaders made their last stand in the Holy Land. Not that Kinraid knew, or cared one jot about those gallant knights of old"(451). And thus history, without memory, repeats itself in an endless cycle of aggression, of victory and defeat. And the real tragedy of Sylvia's Lovers is that fame even now, even as I write this essay, even as you read it, rests with the fighters at St Jean d'Acre and the pressgangs at Monkshaven and not with the story of Sylvia and her lovers.

Sylvia sees the world of adventure her father and Charley talk of at the quiet farm as the change from a winter's night to "life, and light, and warmth"(103). Like cousin Phillis, she directs her own deep joy and energy into dreams of a fuller life in another world. The insight of the novel is that this fuller life, this world of adventure, is inseparable from the inflexibility, the hard heart, that is Daniel Robson's other legacy to the daughter "vehement in all her feelings"(137). It is a legacy similar to that available to Molly from Mr. Gibson, although the larger world the doctor represents is more that of Drumble than of India. But Sylvia, unlike Molly, does not throw off this masculine inheritance until too late.

Such a story, such a failure, might seem to fit a familiar pattern of the novel of education, or rather of failed education. But that would leave Sylvia's Lovers in the realm of novels about individual lives, however much those lives may speak to us all. The special difference about the novel is that Sylvia's loss is primarily

the loss not of her happiness but of her profound responsiveness to life. As Sanders has commented about Sylvia, "something vital in her has vanished with Charley Kinraid and died with Daniel Robson."[38] Her responsiveness is lost to Sylvia herself but, more importantly, it is lost to those around her, to the world that knew her radiant heart. The young girl swept away into hysterical tears by the press gang's raid on the sailors returning to Monkshaven from Greenland possesses a depth of sympathy that can warm that cold northern town. But her absorption of the values of aggression and stern inflexibility petrifies that heart and leaves Monkshaven without the blessing of her tears.

Sylvia does not bring us into the future because her education in forgiveness, the final warming of her heart, is only a private lesson after all. Unlike the lesson of Mr. Carson in Mary Barton, Sylvia's lesson is never learned by her town. This point helps to explain the final lines of the story, which suddenly place us in the present, in a Monkshaven "now . . . a rising bathing-place"(529). From this present perspective we look at the story to see what it has brought us, to see what the continuity, the line of history, has been. And the message of the story is that there has been no continuity, that the feelings and meaning, the lessons of this love story, have not redeemed the sad past by brightening the present. They have not made a difference to a town whose progress can be marked by its becoming a resort. Without that difference, that continuity, we remain with only the dislocating possibility of reliving such past losses yet again.

Sylvia's Lovers explicitly ends with two versions of history, the private and the public. For the point is that the discrepancy between the private and the public truths, between what really happened and what lives in public memory, goes on to this day. That public version, the one we all live in outside the story, is still characterized by the harsh values of a world that prefers judgment to mercy, that celebrates martial victories and moulds Sylvia's story into a "tradition of the man who died of starvation while his wife lived in hard-hearted plenty not two good stone's throw away"(530). And the private version is not even remembered directly, but known only by hearsay, by a bathing-woman who knew an old man when she was a girl who "could never abide to hear the wife blamed. He would say nothing again the husband"(530). Those old man's words so barely recalled are all that remains to Monkshaven of the insights of mercy, and thus of the power of what has been to transform what will be.

We see in this late novel what we haven't seen since Mary Barton, the child of the future, in this case a daughter, Bella, going off to Canada at the end of the book. That exit, unlike Mary Barton's in Gaskell's first novel, does fit with the pattern of the fiction. Bella makes this trip to Canada precisely because we have failed at home, failed to feminize our values, our reading of events, and how we choose to make history. Bella is gone because the future is not here, in a world that only repeats the cruelties of the past. Nor can we assume that the future is in Canada. It too may only be another warrior world.

The public failure is why, even when readers say the novel has a happy ending in the deathbed forgiveness and reconciliation in love of Sylvia and Philip, that happiness is superseded by a larger sense of disaster, loss and waste. The private answer, or the personal message of Christianity, is not by itself enough. Nor is the fact of the novel itself, that not only the bathing-woman but more directly, the narrator, recalls the story and has now told it to us. For it has not, at least not in the time in which the novel ends nor in the time in which we read it, made a difference in our shared lives, any more than it made a difference to the citizens of Monkshaven.

Our personal responses are also not enough. We reduce the book if we read it as suggesting we might be content with those final scenes. Gaskell is not simply a Christian novelist, carrying the living message of a forgiving heart. That route, as the novel itself explicitly dramatizes, leads to the noble and self-effacing life of Hester Rose. Ineffectual in bringing happiness or averting catastrophe, unfit to be a heroine, Hester plays out her role in Monkshaven by founding alms-houses for poor disabled sailors on the Horncastle road. This is, indeed, good work. But it is the kind of work there has always been in a world of destruction. "Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody Poor." We can hardly confuse Hester's alms-houses with a better world.

Gaskell is not only a Christian novelist but an historical novelist and a feminine novelist. She presents the values she would have us affirm and also depicts for us how we must affirm them, publicly as well as individually, as a community moving forward in

time. There have always been people who have learned the lesson of love and mercy. And we have told ourselves that such people can influence us unawares. We recall Wordsworth's tribute to the "little, nameless, unremembered, acts/Of kindness and of love" and Eliot's belief that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts." Gaskell would probably agree. Nonetheless, her fiction makes a greater demand, that we do become aware, that we learn the lesson publicly as well. She shows us what kinds of members of a community now can teach us, whom we must listen to. They are the dissenters, the simple Christians, the women. We see them as the childish, the escapist, the ignorant, the weak. In this man's world, this real world, they are the very people we consider out of touch with truth. They are the people we do not now let define the direction of our culture, people having much in common with the author herself.

Notes

1. The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction From Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.
2. The Realistic Imagination, 4.
3. See, for example, Kathleen Tillotson's important discussion of Mary Barton in Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961); Edgar Wright's Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965); Arthur Pollard's classic appreciation, Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966); and Margaret Ganz's Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969).
4. David Cecil commented that in a world of Victorian eagles "we have only to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove." Early Victorian Novelists (London: Constable & Co., 1935), pp. 197-98. I too am arguing that Gaskell was a dove, but the implications are different. As Martin Dodsworth pointed out about Cranford, the "serious concerns of the book have been neglected for a belle-lettristic study of incidental detail," in "Women Without Men at Cranford," Essays in Criticism, XIII (1963), 133.
5. Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (1973, rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 77.
6. Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, 57.
7. Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Change (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

8. Cranford, The Works of Mrs. Gaskell (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1906), II, p. 174. All further references to Gaskell's novels will be from this, the Knutsford edition.

9. Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 87.

10. These are, respectively, the last three words of Rhoda Fleming and the last sentence of the "Preface" to The Vicar of Bullhampton.

11. For Elizabeth Gaskell's hopes for Ruth and attitude to readers' responses, see The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1966), 220-227. All further references to the letters are to this edition.

12. Lord Byron, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome McGann, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), III, 16.

13. The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), 15. Arthur Melville Clark commented years ago about Gaskell that "she takes her place among those novelists who have by design so treated the life of their own period as to produce fiction that was historical from the outset." "The Historical Novel," Studies in Literary Modes (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1946), 4.

14. We see this in John Lucas's claim in a generally excellent discussion of Gaskell in The Literature of Change, 2nd ed. (1977; rpt. Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1980), 2, that Gaskell's "last work, Wives and Daughters, has far more in common

with the early Cranford than it has with what comes between. . . . For they are both beautiful idylls."

15. The debate, ongoing since Gaskell first published her work, distinguishes the Manchester novels from the southern, country novels, choosing either that the country novels are too sentimental and the urban novels powerfully realistic or that the urban novels are forced propaganda while the southern works have the pace and beauty of nature lovingly recalled. The problem with either side is that both assume a divided canon and from that infer a divided author (or, perhaps, the other way around).

16. The Literature of Change, 2.

17. See Samuel Pickering, Jr.'s excellent discussion of unitarianism in the Moral Tradition in English Fiction, 1785-1850 (New Hampshire: The Univ. Press of New England, 1976).

18. Literary Women: The Great Writers (1974; rpt. New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 28.

19. "Mrs. Gaskell," The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ian Watt (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 221; and Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970), 68.

20. U. C. Knoepflmacher, "Thoughts on The Aggression of Daughters," The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 88-122.

21. W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1975), 237.

22. See Jacqueline Berke and Laura Berke, "Mothers and Daughters in Wives and Daughters: A Study of Elizabeth Gaskell's Last Novel," The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), 95-109.

23. Ibid, 105-106.

24. Yet in the case of Frankenstein, Ellen Moers's reading of the novel in Literary Women in terms of mothers and daughters is certainly as successful as Knoepflmacher's different view.

25. Patricia Meyer Spacks, discussing novels about women's relations to a world outside themselves, comments that the "values of society provide a screen behind which women can conduct their inner lives; they may, at best, actually supply a means for expressing the dimensions of inner reality." The Female Imagination (1972; rpt. New York: Avon Books, 1975), 352.

26. Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel, 250.

27. Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention, 166; Aina Rubenius, The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), 100. We might also recall Gaskell's own knowledge of Branwell Bronte.

28. In the example of Gaskell's son, the psychological explanation is implicitly sexist, as if Gaskell's novels were substitute babies, her aesthetic commitment a sort of sidetracked mothering instinct. While she probably began to write to distract her from her grief at her son's death, her novels were not her children. She had four daughters who satisfactorily filled that role.

29. Spacks, however, questions our traditional view that Molly's

marrying Roger is a happy ending, The Female Imagination, 118-119.

30. Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis, 211.

31. Deirdre David, Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 39. See also Elaine Showalter's mention of the same point made by Lorna Sage in 1974, A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists From Bronte to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), 84.

32. Winifred Gerin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), 140.

33. Among those who find the ending positive, see the excellent study by Andrew Sanders,The Victorian Historical Novel (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

34. Tess of The D'Urbervilles, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), 2nd. ed., 11. All further references to Tess are to this edition.

35. Both Arthur Pollard and John Lucas have already noted the link between Gaskell and Hardy. See Novelist and Biographer and The Literature of Change.

36. The Victorian Historical Novel, 199.

37. Sense and Sensibility, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 93.

38. The Victorian Historical Novel, 223.